DENIED
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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 121
Matthew 26:31–35, 69–75

That is the only reality: that God's love is the only thing
that makes sense out of suffering, conflict, and tragedy.
God's love does not do away with suffering,
conflict, and tragedy: the cross should teach us that.
God's love does not do away with it;
God's love is the thing that makes it possible to bear it,
to see it, to share in it, to understand it, and to pass through it.
That is the truth of the Gospel; that is the essence of the Passion.

Peter J. Gomes
Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living

It is not possible to be in church together today without thinking of the Northern Illinois University students who died last week, their stunned and grieving parents and families, the NIU student body and faculty.

And it is not possible this morning not to ask the questions on everyone's heart: Why do these things happen? Why in this beautiful and good nation of ours do random killings continue to happen?

I know that Dana Ferguson will lead us later to bring all of this to God.

I simply want to say a word about the culture in which we all live, a culture saturated with violence—violence as entertainment, violence as a game, violence as a right. It is not the occasion for politics and ideology, but we do have an unprecedented problem: a culture saturated with violence—and with guns, easily accessible firearms. Illinois's gun law, among the best in the nation, could not prevent this.

And so this morning I want hurting families and a university to know that we care. We will not avert our eyes. And we will continue to discuss and argue and advocate and pray about the violence and the guns among us.

> *Dear God, we ask you to bless the families, the university community, with healing grace. And bless us all with impatience and determination*

to continue to work for a world in which all the children are safe. We pray in your Son's name, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

There is a great painting that comes to mind every time I think about Peter, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus, the one who denied him. It is one of those images that is so powerful it gets into your mind, burned into your memory, and stays there. The painting is *The Martyrdom of St. Peter* by the Italian artist Caravaggio, and it is in the Church of Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome. We were there with the Fourth Church Morning Choir, which was on tour presenting concerts in churches in Rome and Florence. It was my first time in Italy. When we were in Rome, one of the choir members, who knows more about art than I do, told me about the painting in a church just down the street from our hotel. He was going to see it and thought we might want to go along. We did, and I'm glad.

I have never forgotten it. I have a book about the artist Caravaggio, who, in addition to being the most famous Italian artist in the year 1600, was something of a rascal, a street brawler who frequented taverns, brothels and was always just one step ahead of the law. *The Martyrdom of St. Peter* is one of the paintings in the book. It's a huge painting, flanking the altar. *The Conversion of St. Paul,* another famous painting by Caravaggio, is on the other side. The background of *The Martyrdom of St. Peter* is dark, brooding. A crucifixion is happening, carried out by three men dressed in ordinary clothes. It is an unusual crucifixion: the man on the cross is about to be crucified upside down. It is a nasty business. One of them is lifting the cross to a 45-degree angle; another crouches and puts his shoulder and back beneath the cross to lift; a third is hoisting the cross with a rope across his back. It is hard, heavy work. The figure on the cross, Peter, is upside down, feet up, head down at a 45-degree angle. He's an elderly man, balding, with a gray beard. His body is rough, muscular, used to hard work; his biceps and shoulder muscles bulge as he strains, not only in pain but also to lift his head, to see something or someone. You can look into his face, but his eyes are averted—"drifting to wherever he must go to endure the pain" (see *Caravaggio: Painter of Miracles*, Francine Prose, p. 75).

The tradition is that Peter went to Rome around 62 CE, thirty years after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, to visit the Christian community that was already ten years old, and got caught up in the great persecution under the Emperor Nero around the year 64. The tradition is that it was his request that he be crucified upside down so as not even to approach the crucifixion of his Lord.

Caravaggio's painting of that moment, Peter's humanity, his brave face, his determination and courage have lodged in my memory ever since I saw it.

And I suppose the reason is that I find him to be one of the most compelling, certainly the most human, characters in the story of Jesus. I think about him more and more as the years pass. Someone noted that if Jesus reveals who God is, Peter reveals who we are. That final act in his life had its origins thirty years before, when, as a young man in his thirties, one night he denied his Lord.

His name was Simon. He lived in Capernaum, a fishing village on the Sea of Galilee, with his wife and her mother. He worked as a fisherman with his brother Andrew. They were business partners with another Capernaum family—a man by the name of Zebedee and his sons, James and John. Some speculate that these people knew one another and that they must have known Jesus. Andrew is the first to be compelled by Jesus. Andrew brings his brother Simon. Jesus asks them to follow him, and they do, all four of them. And Jesus gives Simon a nickname: "You are a rock, a solid rock of a man. You will be my rock. You are Peter—Petros, Petra, Cephas—the rock." Thereafter he was known as Simon Peter, or Peter, the name Jesus gave him.

Jesus, who was from Nazareth, made his headquarters in Capernaum, perhaps in Peter's house. And soon Peter, the Rock, became first among the disciples, the spokesperson. He was part of an inner circle, along with James and John, who are with Jesus at important times in the story. He is impulsive, impetuous. He falls asleep at an inopportune time; he talks out of turn and inappropriately at a particularly mysterious, holy moment on the Mount of Transfiguration. In the midst of the mystery, Jesus' face shining, a cloud descending, Peter says, "Let's build a building." Peter is the one who answered Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" with the profound "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" and then just a few minutes later showed that he didn't understand his own words. "You will never suffer, Lord," Peter said. "Get behind me, Satan," Jesus said to his right-hand man, his rock. And it was Peter who, when Jesus was arrested, pulled his sword and struck one of the men who had come for Jesus and earned another rebuke from his Lord.

Peter is a strong man who wears his heart on his sleeve, passionate, loyal, and so very much like us. On the last night of Jesus' life, they were all in a room in Jerusalem, eating a meal that would be their Last Supper. Jesus broke bread and shared a cup of wine with them and then said haunting words: "This is my body; this is my blood." He seems to have known where this was all heading. And he said, "You will all become deserters because of me this night." I can imagine a stunned awkward silence, shifting weight back and forth, clearing throats, staring at the floor. One spoke up, Peter. "Not me, Lord. Even if everyone deserts you, I will never desert you." "Yes, Peter, you too" Jesus said. "You will deny me three times this very night before the cock crows at dawn." "Never! I will follow you to the end. I will

die with you. I will never deny you." I love Peter at that moment, the bravado, the passion, the courage and love. He meant it.

When Jesus was arrested that night, what he predicted, in fact, happened. They all fled for their lives, terrified, deserters. All but Peter—who followed at a safe distance as the mob took Jesus to the house of Caiaphas, the High Priest. As Jesus was being interrogated inside, Peter, trying to remain anonymous, was outside, in the courtyard, passing the time talking with the guards. Suddenly, with no warning, a servant girl said, "You were with him. I saw you." It all happened so quickly: before he even thought about it he said, "I don't know what you're talking about." A little later it happened again, this time a public accusation: "This man was with Jesus." And this time again Peter heard himself say more emphatically, "I swear to God I do not know the man." A third time, some of the bystanders who were there to see how this small drama would unfold said, "Well, you must be one of them. You are a Galilean. We can tell from your accent. What are you doing all the way down here in Judea?" And Peter, once again caught, surprised, frightened, with a curse this time says, "Damn it, man, I do not know him." Dawn was breaking on Friday, Good Friday. A cock crowed somewhere, and Peter left and wept bitterly.

My guess is that every one of us understands that moment and can identify with it. It's a failure of courage to be sure, but it is more than that. He was the rock. His accuser was a young girl. Nobody had shown any interest in the Galileans other than Jesus. Why didn't he say, "Yes, I know him," at least acknowledge an acquaintance? Why the oath taking, the cursing, from the man who doesn't seem to be afraid of anything? It is so ambiguously human.

Tim O'Brien is an author, and a good one, whom I first encountered when he was Writer in Residence at the College of Wooster, where our son was attending. Our son met O'Brien, liked him a lot, and gave me his prize-winning book *The Things They Carried*, about his experience in the Army in the Vietnam War. It is a sensitive and penetrating reflection on courage and why people do the things they do. A Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Macalester in 1968, O'Brien heard from his draft board that summer. His lottery number had come up, and he was drafted. As was the case with many young people in 1968, O'Brien had major issues with the Vietnam War: how we got into it, whether it should have been fought, its terrible cost to the American people in terms of lives and dollars, and the terrible toll it was taking on the Vietnamese and the Laotians, Cambodians, Thais. All that summer he struggled with his conscience: to go or not to go. He wasn't a pacifist. He believed there are times when a nation must go to war and young men and women must kill and be killed. He was proud of what we had done to rid the world of Nazism. He was pretty sure that this was a different kind of war, fought for ideological reasons. Or was he simply frightened? Was it fear that

woke him in the middle of the night? Maybe he was simply afraid, didn't want to die.

One day he simply left and headed for Canada. Near the Canadian border, and safety, he stopped at a tourist fishing camp. The fishing season was over. He was taken in by the proprietor, Elroy, who asked no questions but understood exactly what O'Brien was doing and struggling with. They ate their suppers together, talked some, fished.

After almost two weeks, Elroy and O'Brien head out for some fishing. But Elroy steers the boat all the way to the Canadian side of the river, just twenty feet away, cuts the motor and puts out a line. All O'Brien has to do is step out of the boat and wade to Canada. But he can't do it. Elroy has brought him to the time of decision. O'Brien remembers,

> Right then, with the shore so close, I understood that I would do what I should do. . . . I would not swim away from my country and my life. . . . I would not be brave. . . . I would go to the war. I would kill and maybe die —because I was embarrassed not to. . . . I sat in the bow of the boat and cried.

Elroy started the outboard and they returned to the camp. The next day O'Brien headed home. "I survived," he says. "I was a coward. . . . I went to war." His little book tells the stories of men who fought and died and who were brave. As he watched with a writer's eye and experienced it, he reflected on human courage. Men sometimes are courageous and do the right things because they are "afraid of being seen to be afraid."

And so Simon Peter—strong, loyal, the rock—in a sudden, unexpected encounter suffers a failure of courage. And yet there is another dimension to this affair, an intriguing one. Because like Tim O'Brien, Peter could not simply flee. The rest did, but Peter followed—at a distance, to be sure, but he was the only one close enough to deny Jesus.

There is something about living with high expectations, or having high expectations of yourself, that makes you particularly vulnerable. Ernest Campbell says somewhere that if you have ever had great expectations, you have known bitter disappointment. If you have ever invested heavily in the success of a team, an election, a child, a favorite cause or project and in some way failed—your team, your candidate lost—you know how deeply it hurts.

O'Brien says that his decision was painful because he always saw himself as brave, a hero.

It hurts to fail to live up to the expectations others have, to fail publicly. But it hurts even more, hurts spiritually, to fail to live up to your own hopes and standards and expectations.

What do you do with that? You turn it all over to God is what you do. You do what Peter did. He went back to the disciple band with his very public failure. He didn't run away back to Capernaum, and he didn't commit suicide, as his friend Judas had. He returned to face the others. They had heard him boast. They deserted Jesus, but they had not promised and bragged that they wouldn't. You go back to work. Unlike Judas, whose despair led him to destroy himself, you muster the courage to live with your failings.

Howard Thurman once wrote,

> No event in your life can imprison you. That is what resurrection is about. I shall not allow the events of my life to make me their prisoner. I shall continually believe that God is not through with life, or with me." (*The Growing Edge*)

And Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, in their careful study of *The Last Week* of Jesus' life write, "Neither denials nor betrayals are the worst sin against Jesus or God. The worst sin is despair—loss of faith that repentance will *always, always* obtain forgiveness" (p. 135). That is what Judas missed and what Peter experienced—the grace of God in Jesus Christ that overcomes everything. What Peter learned through this terrible experience is that his relationship with Jesus Christ did not depend on his own performance, his strength and courage, but on the grace of Jesus Christ alone.

The story of Peter continues. On Easter morning, when the women reported that the tomb was empty, Peter ran (you bet he did) along with another disciple, younger, who got there first and then hesitated. Not Peter. Peter walked right in, breathless, and was the first to know—to comprehend the incomprehensible—that Jesus was alive. They met on the beach. "Do you love me, Peter?" Jesus asked three times, just as Peter had denied him three times. "Do you love me?" "Yes, Lord, I love you." "Feed my sheep." Three times.

And so when it came time for someone to talk about it, about him—the Lord Jesus—time to preach and proclaim, it was Peter who first found his voice.

And when the early movement had to decide whom this new way, this new faith, was for, it was Peter who stood up and fought the fight to include the Gentiles, to open the doors to the world.

And when believers started to be arrested and tortured and executed, it was Peter who went to Rome to be with them, to comfort them, and this time to die with them.

The literary scholars ask a very interesting question: Why is the dreadful and embarrassing account of Peter's denial in the Bible at all? There is only one way the account could have been remembered in the first place. Peter himself did it. He was the only one there. He could have chosen to leave it out, forget about it, let it go. No one else among them heard him deny Jesus. And so it was Peter who must have told this story over and over again—the story of his own bravado and failure of courage and the good news, the gospel of Jesus Christ, the amazing story of God's grace and unconditional love—for him, the denier—a love that forgave and cleansed and renewed and that restored his faith and loyalty and this time his courage.

So that this time he did not deny his Lord but, as he boasted years before, died with him and for him.

In the great painting, Peter's striking face, brow furrowed, on his cross, straining in pain, is determined and, yes, courageous. His eyes are averted. He's looking at something, someone who is not in the picture. He's looking, I believe, at Jesus, his Lord.

Amen.